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In Search of Health

Dennis M. Oliver

I came here for the air. The sun shines as brightly here as anywhere. My history is unimportant, too tiring to carry about, to relate. Because the sun shines so brightly, I could see, when I flew in, the roads sweeping out into the desert, uncoiling into nowhere. They were built to meet, but somehow got diverted.

Health is an odd reason to be somewhere. But all I need do is find the reality behind the word, which is a simple enough task. The most healthy place, at least for my pocketbook, is a small cottagelike house. I am surrounded by retired couples, Nebraskans and Kansans and Iowans.

My neighbor is named Prescott. He is a small, dapper man, with a trim white mustache. He was a career sergeant in the army, and now, to supplement his pension, he trains dogs. He called me over my third day here. The occasion was that he heard me playing the guitar. I sit before him and humble myself into silence.

Here I got this guitar. Now Mother, go get the guitar. Now I got this from my dead nephew. I just like it if you look at her. Now I couldnt handle the damn thing, the neck was too wide.

Mrs. Prescott brings out the guitar and hands it to him, saying Here, Pa. In his small red hands he turns it. It pivots about its center of gravity like a mobile, or like something abstract: an idea. Suspended in his hands it shows its form, shows the rich wood, still warm, though unrubbed, unpolished. He points then to the fingerboard, scarred and gouged at the side so that the frets protrude like the heads of nails driven imperfectly.

This neck here, you see, was too goddamn wide, I got little hands. So I just planed her down a bit. To make her fit. Yes. Well, my nephew died and I was over to his place and I just figure nobody ud want this, it was stuck in a closet all dusty. So I tuk it. He told me it was a good guitar. Well I aint played much. Last time before this I had a guitar was nineteen fifteen, I still remember we was walking down a road in Kansas and I was strumming and this friend turn to me and says Sam I give you a dollar if you bust that fucking guitar, and so I laughed and said okay and busted it on a telephone pole. And I aint had a

guitar since till my nephew died. Now I started to play on this, I got me a book with songs, skip to my lou and all, I play it like this . . .

He began to bang away on the guitar.

. . . but it dont sound so hot neither. But then my hands is small, and I figure I can make it fit better, so I planed down the edges here. It fit my hands now, but it still dont sound so good. Well, I take it to a man that knows guitars, and he looks at it and says this is a good guitar. Here, take her, play her a bit.

I take it and try to play. I find I can't tune it. The strings have been put on in the wrong order. The protruding frets dig into my hand. I smile and return it, telling him that it needs new strings.

Yes. Well thats what this man tole me. I said whats this worth, he said fifty dollars. Well Im no fool, the sumbitch is lying I know. So I figure its worth two, maybe three hundred. Here, you want to try again?

I decline.

Every morning at sunup he raises the flag on a small flagpole he has installed in his front yard. He salutes it. Every evening at sundown he goes out and lowers it.

He trains dogs. Today he told me what a good trainer he was.

A dog wont obey just nobody. Folks bring me their dog, give me money, I teach the dog to obey *me*. Half my customers dont know how to handle a dog. They come back then and complain the dog wont obey. I tell them to bring the dog around. They do. I say to the dog sit, he sits. I say come, he comes. The lady says why dont he do that for me? I tell her I dont know, but the dog obeys me and thats all I can do. But I know, I do know. You got to let that dog know who is boss and who is not. I had this lady had a dog that howled when she drove it around in her car. No sooner that dog get in a car, he start to howl. This dog is a big Saint Bernard. So she brings it to me and says you got to stop this dog howling in the car. So I say get in my car, and we all three get in, and I start to drive, and this dog he starts to howl. Well, I give that dog a hard look in the eye and say stop howling. Dogs are smart. He stops howling. See, I say, now he dont howl.

Mr. Prescott spits in the grass. He wears a jacket, in warm weather or cold. On the back it says "Prescott's College of Canine Obedience."

I rehearse some of the methods for achieving health:

The golden mean (balance of excesses).

The amputation of desire (renunciation).

Gardening or farming (functional duty as therapy).

Charity (loss of the self in others).

Common sense (get hold of yourself).

Sometimes I can hear him beating the dogs. He is a no-nonsense man, very single-minded. He does not curse when he beats them. He saves his breath, and as he strikes I hear only small involuntary whistles.

Today they asked me over for coffee. I accepted because I had nothing better to do. He is dreadful. But interesting. I asked him about adventures he had in the army.

Adventures I say. Ma, go get the scope and rifle. I show you something really good. See this was April nineteen eighteen in the North of France, I remember a cold sunny morning. No leaves on the trees.

Mrs. Prescott brought in a rifle and a scope in a leather case.

This scope is worth a thousand dollars. Here now, see. Take this rifle. So one of our men standing in chow line just crumples and falls down. Then I hear a rifle crack and I seed blood pouring out his back. That rifle there did it. We all run for cover, and I told the lieutenant Id get the son of a bitch, so I set out on a big circle to a stand of trees where he was at. It tuk me an hour to get there. Well then some of our men start popping up. Must of been eight hundred yards, and he takes a shot, and I see where he is at. I just get up behind him, about a hundred fifty yards, sight in on him, and just wait. I wait to get calm. I wait until Im peaceful with myself, till Im just about half asleep. I *love* myself at this minute you see. Not to miss a shot you got to be calm and love yourself. Two, three minutes maybe, and this hun is setting up there, calm and peaceful too, because he is a hell of a shot and loves himself. I can hear a bird singing. So then after a minute or two my rifle just goes off, *bam!* All by itself almost. And that and the bird singing is the only noise. The hun, who got himself up in the crotch of a tree, gives a little shrug, like hes shifting hisself, and then he is quiet too. I must of set there another minute or two, just feeling good. See that rifle now, that stock?

The rifle is a fine piece of machinery. But the stock is short, bumpy and ugly. Misshapen.

I put that hump on with plastic wood. I took this rifle off the jerry, and took the stock off the rifle and made my own. Its real handlable now, you can shoot it if you got to with one hand, now I took that old one off. See? Grab that hump. Now its loaded so be careful. Any son of a bitch try to come in here'll get what for. Throw open that bolt.

I throw it open. There is a cartridge inside.

Take out the cartridge. See now, see this tip here. I exed her. Soft head. Leave my mark. You got to leave your mark. Any sumbitch come in here he get what for.

He also showed me the German's belt buckle, saying *Gott mit uns*.

I took the cartridge and looked at it carefully. It was shaped like a child's prick, smooth and coniform. The parabola from the casing to the bullet was smooth, a perfect circumcision. The belt buckle said *Gott mit uns*. I once saw a picture in a German book (published during the last war). In the picture some German soldiers are leading away at gunpoint a great many civilians. They were Belgian. Underneath, in old faktura print, was the rubric: *So haben sie es gewollt*.

She only has one breast. She sits beside him, seconding his conversation, reminding him of forgotten details in his anecdotes.

I had made some comment about the danger of guns.

Yes sir, I say. In my unit nobody ever got kilt with guns. Except in battle. I made them keep two chambers empty when they carried pistols. Nobody. Terrible stupid stories, fellow shot himself in the head.

It was in the movie theatre, Pa, says Mrs. Prescott.

Yes, in the movie theatre, this fellow was sitting there wearing a fortyfive. You dont need a fortyfive to watch a movie. Dudes that want people to think theyre killers. They couldnt kill a shit. Well he just shoots hisself in the head with a fortyfive watching a movie.

Remember how it happened, Pa, on the seat.

Yes. Well, he goes to stand up and the holster hooks itself on the arm of the seat and he is already kind of lurching up and the gun gets twisted around and pointing to his head and *bam!* That was in Texas, in the movie theatre, I saw that. Hardly had no head left to speak of. Stupid son of a bitch.

I am thinking about a field in Kansas, the broken body of a guitar. About a tree in Northern France from which dangles a German's skeleton. His pants have fallen to the anklebones. A movie theatre in Texas and a headless soldier. Surly dogs with swelling beneath their fur. A burglar.

Why did I come to Las Cruces? There are a dozen places which would serve as well. Serendipity brought me here. Rather, chance brought me here, but serendipity is the quality which transforms the random to significance.

He has false teeth. Very often he flashes the uppers with something between a hiss and a whistle as he inspires. This punctuation is the case when he is intently concentrating on something: beating a dog or telling a story.

Pa has insomnia awful, she mentioned yesterday. I checked, walking by at one last night. I could see his figure moving quickly and nervously back and forth behind the curtains. After twenty minutes it disappeared, but in another ten minutes returned. I wondered if he carried the rifle as he paced the rooms of his house. It was two before the lights went out. I stood in the yard until three, occasionally hiding behind the bushes when an auto passed.

The air that morning had to be clear and sharp. April in the North of France, the sun shining. Not far off an ocean swimming with life. If I were the German I would not complain about my manner of death. Sitting in a tree on a cold sharp sunny April morning in the North of France, before pollution, watching small green buds make their first reluctant entry into the air. After the first shot, I would shift my rifle, feeling a certain safety in distance. Meanwhile, unknown to me, my destiny, my circling destiny, approached. Good fortune, serendipity, to die without fear in a time when the world made promises.

Yet this is the nostalgia we get from looking at old photographs. I should not posture. I am a gutter, a sewer. Through myself ages flow. The effluence brought about by delicate electrochemical imbalances. Better health: flesh crooning to itself, creating and uncreating at the same rate. A kind of conscious

coma that neither he nor I has been able to achieve. Not catatonia, which is simply the final human response to a dilemma.

The coming generation will be the last, for a millennium, to suffer.

Serendipity because each of us finds the image he desires. I ask them if they would care to drop over for a cold drink (tea or soda, for both are teetotalers), and they accept, flattered and smiling.

This is the way the evening goes:

The doorbell rings, and I answer. They come in. He is wearing, *mirabile dictu*, a tie and jacket; she carries a small handbag. They are dressed as if for an evening on the town.

She drinks tea, and he takes coca-cola. We sit, nibbling at the cheese and sausages, while he talks. I am very excited, and I have difficulty at first in following his narrative. I limit myself to its contents, but gradually its form becomes more distinct.

. . . only time I killed jerries. I seen it over there in the second war too, mean sumbitches they was. A bunch of us we oncet took three of em prisoners on a cold fucking day it was in February. We would of had to taken em eight miles in the snow all the time worrying about being spotted by their friends with them three sumbitches on our hands. Man ud be a fool. So we did them in . . .

Strong and straight, even at seventy. And a man *would* be a fool. One's own life, he knows, comes first.

. . . always was aware of my position. Tother sergeants ud go out and drink, ud get in fights with their men, but I never did nothing like that. I remember . . .

If I were a dog or a soldier shot in France or a prisoner I would have no special regrets either. What need the dog question? That he is being beaten? All he need do is obey and the beating stops. Or a prisoner. Think of the walk through the snow, sensing perhaps that for you the war is over, sensing that you will soon be in a warm place with food. You look ahead at the path, counting the steps. *So haben sie es gewollt*, for no man is taken prisoner against his will. The sudden explosion.

After a while she begins to twitch. She thinks it is time to leave. He continues his monologue until I interrupt.

I see you're a bit tired. Wouldn't you care to go home? I walk over to her and take her withered arm. He lapses into silence. As I had hoped, he is enjoying himself, and does not wish to stop. She also senses this.

No, no, I'm just fine, and Pa is enjoying himself.

I can *see* you are tired, I answer. Now, Mr. Prescott can stay, there is no need for him to accompany you. At your age you need your rest. Let me walk you to your door.

Not stay with Pa? She cannot quite grasp this. It smacks of treason.

Now why should you have to stay? Surely there's no problem if you get some sleep. Let me walk you home.

Gradually it becomes clear to them that what I offer is what we all desire. I

see her to her door, and when I return, Mr. Prescott is seated, chewing a cracker, his mind in the past.

Now, I say, smiling, tell me some more stories.

. . . I remember . . .

As I listen I undress him. He does not know he is being undressed, he merely continues his monologue. He has told me, and now he tells me again, of all the killing he has seen and done; he tells me again how to train a dog, he tells me of the high opinion his dogs have of his training, he tells me what the captain told him upon his retirement, how the captain said the army needs more men like you. He tells me again of killing the jerry in the spring of 1918. Though he does not know it he sits naked in the chair, an aging lean Buddha, his mustache moving up and down as he talks, the words hissing through his teeth. His monologue, like time itself for me, begins again and moves again with each new breath of each new memory. I wish he were still young, as he is preserved in the best of these tales. His body is decaying now, moled and withering. But in spite of it all he is a steady man. It is my good fortune to have met him.

I sit at his feet, listening to him talk.

I wish I were a dog, a hun. His genitals are well shaped. Not having to perform, they betray no aging. So they looked fifty years ago when the air was clear. I need air badly, for my health. I wish I were a guitar. The world needs more men like him. I sit at his feet.